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ABSTRACT

Culture has been found to be a confounding variable in the accurate assessment of affectively and cognitively disabled students, especially when the student is a member of a minority group. Because of differences, including differences in expectations, among members of minority and majority cultures, culturally laden behaviors may be interpreted as abnormal by the majority culture. Identification as a member of a minority group has been linked by research to proportionately higher levels of labeling of affective and cognitive disabilities than typically found in the majority population. Affective disabilities, which are displayed as excesses of inappropriate or disruptive behaviors, may be due in part to mismatches between cultural values and expected behaviors. The identification of cognitive disorders based on low intellectual functioning or specific learning disabilities has been found to be associated with language deficits that can be compounded or misinterpreted in minority students. The problems inherent in assessment may be improved in the future, but it will always be necessary to consider cultural factors in educational assessment practices. (Contains 14 references.) (SLD)

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PROBLEMS INHERENT IN THE COGNITIVE AND AFFECTIVE ASSESSMENT OF MINORITY STUDENTS

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The Concept of Culture

The term *culture* is not a concept about which the last word has been written. It is a field of inquiry that has been actively investigated for the past 100 years. It was formalized as a unique and legitimate field of inquiry at the turn of the last century by Emile Durkheim, who is credited as being the *"father of sociology."*

Culture has only been considered as a contributing and influencing factor related to educational assessment practices for about the past 25 years. This concept of culture was brought to public attention when standardized assessment instruments that were being used to qualify/disqualify students for various educational programs were challenged within the Courts because of perceived prejudice. This inequality was the result of children of the majority culture only having been used in the establishment of norms for most of the major tests of that time. Children from minority cultures had simply not been included or had not been included at a rate that was proportionate to their actual percentage within the total population of the United States. Also, some of the questions that comprised the tests were noticed as biased.

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Stemming from these court-initiated allegations of bias the makers and users of assessment instruments were forced to deal with the issues of culture as it is expressed within educational settings. In looking at the concept it was apparent that some individuals are excluded from the majority culture. This exclusion may be due to personal prejudices of others toward the individual based upon his/her religious, racial, and/or sexual orientation. It was also noticed to stem from differences in national origin, language, and/or having a disabling condition, even though civil rights laws of the United States expressly forbid discrimination against anyone based on these factors (*e.g.*, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Americans with Disabilities Act, etc.). It is noticed that sometimes exclusion may also be a matter of personal choice because the individual elects not to participate or simply cannot gain access due to his/her individual differences. Exclusion from the majority culture may continue due to age, custom, relocation from another country, physical isolation in remote geographical areas of the United States, and/or a personal feeling of disassociation that becomes an ingrained and ongoing style of life, as well as other possible reasons.

In the United States *culture* typically means the knowledge, concepts, and values shared by the group members through a system of communications (Erickson, 1997). Within the United States there is the general *culture* at both high levels and low levels that is shared among the residents (Hall, 1989). This kind of *culture* is frequently known and influenced through the popular media. Examples of high culture include the arts, literature, and elements associated by many with elite tastes. Examples of low culture or popular culture include less prestigious versions of these same elements. Examples of popular culture include comic books, rock 'n roll music, and blue jeans.

The culture may be evident to any observer and it may be hidden as well. The outwardly noticed aspects of the culture generally have to do with ways of communication between people and values. Within both high and low forms of culture communication is one identifiable aspect of

difference. Distinct language communities develop, which share word knowledge and the same pronunciations. In high culture this may be seen as the use of *standard English*, which is found throughout the United States and is frequently identified as what is heard on the media during news broadcasts. Within low culture language still performs exactly the same functions of communications between individuals but takes on differences due to dialects (*i.e.*, regional variations of language), slang (*i.e.*, words that are used today that may be out of use within a very short period of time), and the influences of foreign populations that have moved to the United States (*i.e.*, the southern United States uses more words that have African origins than does the southwestern United States, which has a heavier Spanish influence).

The invisible aspects of culture are probably more important and less easy to notice. These same language differences can be noticed in the nonverbal aspects of communication. Both high and low forms of culture have unwritten *rules* or expectations regarding the behavior of people. Examples of areas of difference include regarding how one may look at another person when engaged in conversation based on the status of both parties. It also would include appropriate forms of responding, modes of showing deference to individuals with status, topics that are polite versus those that are impolite, etc.

The culture of the United States is not universal - not all residents share the same levels of enculturation, the knowledge about the culture, nor is there agreement about all the concepts, nor do all the residents value those concepts held by the majority of people in like and similar ways. The differences occur in forms that are both visible and invisible to the outside observer, and they may be both planned and unplanned. These differences are most frequently demonstrated in individual differences based on language, dress, choices of foods, and/or religion. All of these aspects combine together to form one's cultural life experience.

The problem for educators, especially those involved in the diagnostic and remediation process of students with special needs, is to attempt to alleviate any bias or discrimination that might occur within the assessment process due to cultural variables found within the school environment or the instruments used to notice individual differences. Removing the sources of bias cannot always be done successfully, but at least the differences can be accounted for where known and a closer and presumably truer estimate of a student's ability may be made.

Individual Affective Disorder

Affective disorders are typically and broadly defined as a disruption of the emotions, feelings, and/or attitudes of an individual that are expressed as behaviors severe enough in intensity and/or duration to require intervention. The individual's actions are so inappropriate, disruptive, and possibly destructive that the behaviors interfere with the educational process of others and/or the student (Vergason & Anderegg, 1997). Affective disorders frequently take some form of acting out, unruly, and/or aggressive behaviors, but may also be exhibited in the form of extreme withdrawal from interactions.

Within the United States these types of disorders, which are more frequently referred to as *behavior disorders* or *severe emotional disturbance* are usually specifically defined by a criteria model, such as that found within the Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders, (4th ed.) (American Psychiatric Association, 1994), which is generally accepted by most professionals. Treatment is usually provided through a combination of educationally-based mental health services offered within the public schools in special education-based programs for behaviorally disordered or severely emotionally disturbed children that have the goal of inclusion of the student back within regular education classes and the mainstream environment.

But sometimes cultural differences may be the root cause of conflict and the primary reason

for a student to be noticed as exhibiting too much or too little of the educationally required appropriate behaviors. It is possible for the student's values, language, and/or frame of reference to be just different enough from that of the majority culture so that he/she is noticed as being *significantly different*. This finding by those individuals charged by the schools with making decisions (*e.g.*, teachers, administrators, counselors, etc.) about these issues may result in the student being mislabeled as *disabled*.

Possible examples of this culture-based conflict within the educational environment could include any of the following:

- ❑ Native American students who do not make eye contact with authority figures and give the impression to those majority culture teachers of being *"disinterested,"* *"day-dreaming,"* or *"disrespectful"* (Kallam, Hoernicke, & Coser, 1994).
- ❑ African American students, who culturally may be more likely to vocalize and argue about aspects of a problem, may be noticed as being *"verbally aggressive,"* and *"challenging of authority,"* or worse, as overall more aggressive. This has prompted physical fights with majority students and strained interracial tolerances (Anderson, 1994).
- ❑ Asian Americans, who because they enjoy the distinction of being *"the model minority,"* are typically underdiagnosed to avoid a loss of honor on the part of the individual and family objections. When Asian American students are identified as having significant behavior problems they are more at risk of being overmedicated when psychotropic drugs are used (Ishii-Jordan & Peterson, 1994).

What appears to be relatively constant among students of all cultural backgrounds who display affective disorders is a need to acquire appropriate socialization skills and other behaviors that are

acceptable in the educational environment and the community.

Individual Cognitive Disorder

Cognitive deficits are usually expressed by the individual as some variation of below average functioning on intellectual (*i.e.*, aptitude) and/or perceptual (*i.e.*, central nervous system integration) skills (Vergason & Anderegg, 1997). Throughout most of the world an educationally significant deficit in cognitive processing is associated with the disability category of *mental retardation*. In English-speaking North American and parts of western Europe a distinction has been made between developmental delays and significantly below normal intellectual functioning, which is associated with mental retardation, and a more specific cognitive processing disorder, which is associated with another educational category referred to as *learning disability*.

A learning disability is typically suspected when a student has problems in listening, speaking, reading, writing, and/or reasoning due to retrieval, storage, and/or processing problems. The problem(s) are not due to a lack of trying on the part of the student or a failure to cooperate. In fact, the student has average to above average intelligence, but still experiences failure in one or more areas within the school environment (National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities, 1994).

In each of the noticed school-related areas - listening, speaking, reading, writing, and/or reasoning - culture may impact the student due to the inherent dependence on the use of language. Those students who are of the majority culture are more likely to understand words and concepts based on what may be an ingrained and natural inclination toward a native means of communication. Students who are of the minority cultures engage in this same natural acquisition process related to language, but it applies to the minority culture language. This acquisition may not transfer over to the majority culture language in a like and similar manner and so the minority student does not have this same advantage. The minority student may be disadvantaged by having to overcome both a

neurologically-based deficit in the ability to learn, as well as an acquired deficit due to a secondary knowledge regarding the content, form, and/or usage of language of the majority population.

Examples of culturally-related cognitive-based problems include:

- ❑ Native Americans, Hispanics, and other minority students may speak tribal languages or Spanish, each of which is different language from what is used by the majority culture. For these students the use of the majority culture language, English, is dependent on both the level of identification with the majority culture and access to that culture. This typically varies from student to student and may even be concealed by the student and his/her family in order to more closely resemble members of the majority culture (Gumperz, 1982).
- ❑ The *syntax* or the way words are put together to form constructions such as phrases and sentences used by some African Americans is still reflective of western African language patterns. This difference has created problems for students within the schools and has caused discussion concerning *Ebonics*, or Black English (Lewis, 1997).

Culture is also used within the instructional process when illustrative examples are provided from folk tales, religious texts, news events, programs broadcast by the media, and other items that are taken for granted as simply being *known* by many teachers because it is routinely understood to most. These examples that are provided to explain and make clear may actually confuse.

In this context culture provides a cognitive framework for the exchange of ideas. This shared knowledge base may actually serve as a *scaffold* for the majority culture students, placing them at a starting point that is above that of their minority peers.

Problems Inherent in the Diagnostic Process

Assessment is generally considered to be the process of collecting information about the perceived strengths and weaknesses of a person for many purposes. For minority students enrolled in school and involved in the assessment process the potential for a misdiagnosis exists. At least four interrelated factors should be considered during the evaluation process which may contribute to the incorrect evaluations:

❶ Minority students are referred for assessment to detect individual affective and/or cognitive disorders at rates that are higher than their proportion within the population of the United States and this is true of minorities in most countries (Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders, 1989). Salvia and Ysseldyke (1998) have noticed that the single-best way for a student to become affectively or cognitively different is simply to be referred by a member of the school's faculty for testing (*i.e.*, one professional will typically concur with the findings of another professional rather than contest and disagree with the original finding).

❷ Language differences between a student and his/her social and/or instructional environment may impede chances for academic and interpersonal success. Substantial language differences between the culturally different student and his/her instructional environment can typically be seen as contributing to academic and/or social difficulties. This potential bias is generally openly acknowledged by most professionals and is readily accommodated when the difference is made known (Peterson & Ishii-Jordan, 1994). However, subtle language differences, especially those that reflect cultural values may not be readily apparent. These types of inaccuracies, that are eventually expressed as academic and social problems, generally go unnoticed because the frame of reference for the evaluators and the minority student is often simply not consciously considered, nor even initially recognized.

For the evaluation process weaknesses that are associated with language and its usage are particularly difficult since the process is often language-bound, either in whole or in part. Without language the assessment process is almost always more difficult (Sattler, 1992) and may be more inaccurate. With culturally variant understandings of the common language any results are uncertain at best.

❸ The perceptions of teachers may be faulty based on differences between majority culture expectations and minority culture values. A different aspect of this same problem may also be noticed when well-meaning teachers dilute standards and their expectations for minority culture students for either academic performance and/or social competency by requiring lower levels of skills and behavior and accepting those lower levels as being adequate.

❹ There also exists varying levels of distrust by members of minority cultures towards members of the majority culture (Peterson & Ishii-Jordan, 1994; Sattler, 1992). This intuitive distrust is often based on historical differences between the majority culture and the minority culture and is an ongoing influence found when dealing with the student or his/her parents and a barrier to mutual trust (Kallam, Hoernicke, & Coser, 1994). Associated with this distrust may be anxiety, insecurity, and prejudice.

Additionally, there may be problems within the instructional environment due to genuine weakness(es) on the part of the student in one or more areas related to the cognitive process. Problems in the instructional process may also be attributable to a mismatch between a student's learning style and a teacher's instructional style, which may contribute to any of the previously mentioned sources for affective and/or cognitive deficits. Problems may also arise from a student's general unfamiliarity with a subject or a specific concept due to a lack of exposure and/or a lack of a context or frame of reference for understanding the subject matter.

To account for these possibilities as they relate to individual differences an assessment perspective should be adopted that acknowledges that what a student learns and what he/she fails to learn occurs within an instructional context. That instructional context is influenced by both the affective and cognitive characteristics of the student, as well as the educational environment in which the behavior(s) are displayed.

To notice these affective and cognitive differences the environment must be examined, especially as it directly relates to the instructional process. Assessment of minority children is best accomplished when the process identifies those elements that not only influence student performance, but also account for the factors that are under the teacher's control. The assessment process should consider the following:

- The levels at which a student possesses adequate sensory, gross motor, and fine motor abilities and how these elements integrate together within the student.
- The behavior(s) in question and that they are of a kind that a teacher may influence and alter through instructional variables.
- That strengths that may be drawn upon and the weaknesses to be remediated.
- The materials and methods of instruction available for use with the student.

Good instructional practice for all students is grounded in valid assessment of individual strengths and weaknesses. This is true for minority students, as it is for all students. From the results of assessment good teaching practices are derived. These should include the use of:

- Direct observation of both the teaching and the learning environment.
- Use of norm-referenced assessments.
- Use of curriculum-based assessments.
- An analysis of the student's work products.

- An analysis of the student's social skills.
- An analysis of the student's behavior, especially as it relates to the antecedents of the behavior, the behavior itself, and the consequences for the behavior.

Summary:

Culture has been noticed to be a confounding variable in the accurate assessment of affectively and cognitively disabled students, especially when the student is a member of a minority group (Erickson, 1997). Simply being a member of a minority group carries with it an uncertain degree of enculturation and an undeniable difference from the majority population (Gumperz, 1982). These differences, which are complex and largely unknowable, may be due to race, ethnic background, language, and/or disability. Because differences and expectations between the minority and majority cultures exist, culturally laden behaviors may be misinterpreted as abnormal by the majority culture. Cultural differences in the communication styles and cultural life experiences will inevitably impact the results of cognitive and affective assessment.

Identification as a member of a minority group has been linked to proportionately higher levels of labeling of affective and cognitive disabilities than what is typically found within the majority population (Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders, 1989). Affective disabilities, which are displayed as excesses of inappropriate, disruptive behaviors, may be due in part to mismatches between majority and minority cultural values and the behaviors displayed. Cultural variables must be considered during any assessment of cognitive and affective behaviors. The identification of cognitive disorders based on low intellectual functioning or specific learning disabilities are found to be associated with language deficits and/or processing problems due to difficulties in retrieval and storage. These language based problems can be compounded or misinterpreted in minority students with language deficits especially when assessment is made by members of the majority culture.

Several well intentioned attempts to develop culture sensitive measures of cognitive and affective ability have been tried (Salvia & Ysseldyke, 1998). To date, no one has successfully developed a comprehensive measure of cognitive ability or affective behavior. It is possible that no one test will be developed to accurately reflect the cognitive ability and affective behaviors of all cultures. While the current problems inherent in assessment today may be improved in the future, they may never be completely eliminated. Cultural factors will always be an influencing element to consider in educational assessment practices.

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